

# MESSENGER-INQUIRER



December 21, 2024

Beautiful Plant Characteristics Standout in the Winter  
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At first glance, the winter landscape may look uninteresting. However, take a second look. Notice the unique characteristics of plants providing winter interest in the garden. These include exfoliating bark, colorful fruit, small flowers, and even the ability to make a pleasant sound. Shrubs, trees, and perennials that provide a pleasant surprise in the garden or landscape are described below.

Oak leaf hydrangea (*hydrangea quercifolia*) is a large shrub with beautiful exfoliating bark which reveals a brown inner bark. The long and large flower panicle, which emerges in late May to June ranges from 4 to 12 inches long and 3 to 4 inches wide depending on the cultivar. In the fall, the 3 to 8-inch long oak-shaped leaves turn shades of red to orange. Compact forms reaching 3 to 5 feet in height and wide or smaller include ‘Ruby Slippers’, ‘Sikes Dwarf’, and ‘Pee Wee’.

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The Heritage® birch (*Betula nigra* Heritage®) shows off its beautiful peeling bark on its trunk and branches. The color of the bark is described as salmon-brown. The small, young branches hang down gracefully. During the growing season, the leaves are dark green, but turn yellow in the fall. The tree may reach 40 to 50 feet tall and spread 40 to 50 feet wide. It starts as an open tree which is often taller than wide in youth. A single-trunk specimen is available, but it is available as multi-trunk too. It prefers to grow in moist soil but will tolerate compacted soil and drought.

Another tree with the main feature of beautiful, exfoliating, brown and orange bark is the paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*). This plant grows slowly and reaches 20 to 30 feet tall with a spread of 15 to 25 feet. The upright branches form an oval shape. During the growing season, the leaves consist of 3 leaflets compared to the single and simple leaf of some other common maples. In the fall, the leaves turn a russet red color. It requires soil that is well-drained and grows in full sun. This tree may be difficult to find. Check locally, first, then turn to mail order or the internet if necessary.

A shrub to small tree with red berries is the common winterberry, *Ilex verticillata*. This plant is a deciduous holly covered with bright red fruits that persist into winter until the birds devour them. The slow to medium growing shrub can reach 6 to 8 feet in height and width. It prefers well-drained soil but will grow where the soil is moist. Male flowers and female flowers are produced on different plants. To have berries, you will need one male plant among several female plants. Numerous good cultivars are available, selected for fruit size, fruit color, fall leaf

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color, or plant size. For example, Red Sprite is a cultivar that grows 3 to 5 feet tall with large berries. It requires 'Jim Dandy' as the pollinator.

For a plant with flowers in February, turn to Arnold Promise witchhazel, *Hamamelis X intermedia* 'Arnold Promise'. This shrub reaches 15 to 20 feet tall, and the branches may spread over 15 feet long. The cultivar Arnold Promise is one of the best yellow flowering witchhazels. The small yellow flowers have thin, narrow petals which twist. When you see this plant blooming in February, it seems hard to believe your eyes.

With blowing wind, movement and sound are added to the garden by using a grass such as Foerster's feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'). It has quarter to one-half inch wide leaves that form a clump reaching 2 to 3 feet tall. Flower spikes emerge in late May to June and reach about 3 to 4 feet above the foliage. The flowers are greenish with red-bronze tones when they emerge, and they dry a golden color. Foerster's reed grass prefers moist, rich soil but tolerates heavy soil. It endures heat if plenty of moisture is available. A location with full sun is best for this grass. Cut it back to 2 to 4 inches tall in the spring, before new growth forms.

As I walked past my flower border the other day, the green leaves of the herbaceous perennial Italian arum (*Arum italicum*) caught my eye. The foliage appears in late fall and persists through winter in our area. Its green arrow-shaped leaves are a unique sight in the garden this time of year. In the spring, a jack-in-the-pulpit like flower emerges. The foliage dies down as the plant sets red seeds on the stalk in summer. In the fall, the leaves emerge again, and

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the cycle repeats itself. Italian arum prefers to grow in moist, well-drained soil in shade to partial shade. The plant is 12 to 20 inches tall including the seed stalk.

For more information about winter interest in the landscape with plants, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service Office at 270-685-8480 or email [annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu](mailto:annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu).

Annette's Tip:

Notice the branches and shape of trees during a walk, drive, or look out the window. Maples and ashes usually have a broad, rounded crown. Oaks may have an oval, upright canopy with many strong, bold branches. It is beautiful to see snow outlining the branches and accenting the shape and texture of the trees. More information about native trees in Kentucky is available at <https://horticulture.ca.uky.edu/homegardens> under Grower Resources or contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service Office.

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